How a 75-Year-Old Tex-Mex Restaurant Became a Magnet for Politicians and Artists

Rudy “Cisco” Cisneros opened Cisco’s on East Sixth in 1950, becoming fast friends with the Capital City’s movers and shakers.

Some people called him Cisco. Others called him Rudy. Only total strangers said Mr. Cisneros, because once a person had met the gregarious, cigar-chomping owner of Cisco’s Restaurant in Austin, the two were friends for life. For nearly half a century—from 1950 until his passing, in 1995—Rudy “Cisco” Cisneros was one of the Capital City’s bona fide characters. The dining public knew him from the Tex-Mex combo plates, huevos rancheros, and migas his restaurant produced in abundance. Assorted bigwigs, including a future U.S. president and two future Texas governors, knew him as the person behind a much-frequented backroom poker game and a political-gossip exchange. Community leaders sought him out when they needed to find common ground between the city’s Mexican American and Anglo citizens. When he inevitably came to be called the mayor of East Austin, everybody agreed: The title was perfect.

The Cisneros family was well established in Austin’s restaurant community when Rudy decided, at the age of 27, to open his own place on East Sixth Street. Despite having dropped out of grade school, he was smart and self-confident—he had done a stint in the U.S. Army—and he came up with a menu of popular Tex-Mex dishes to serve alongside a selection of pan dulce and exemplary biscuits from his father’s Sunshine Bakery. By all accounts, Cisco’s was a perfectly ordinary operation, except for one oddity: The menu and all of the recipes were delivered verbally, because Rudy refused to have them printed out. When staff and customers complained—which they did, a *lot*—he just dug in his heels. “*We* know what we have!” he’d say.

Quirks aside, the restaurant grew in popularity, and the reason was clearly Rudy. Irrepressibly outgoing, he loved to find out how customers were doing. His friend Ben Barnes, who was Texas’s lieutenant governor in the early seventies, remembers: “I had a serious operation on my back . . . and when I was in the hospital, one morning at seven o’clock, there stood Rudy with a Mexican breakfast in my room!” Cisneros wasn’t just a glad-hander, though. His son Rudy Jr., who is 75, says his dad read the major Texas newspapers every day just so he could converse intelligently with the businessmen who often ate at Cisco’s.

Rudy also loved playing cards, and it wasn't too long before he had a regular afternoon poker game going in the back room at Cisco's. The invitees included assorted politicians, journalists, and other well-placed individuals he had gotten to know, and over time, the venue evolved into a place for exchanging highly valuable information and gossip. Lyndon B. Johnson, then a U.S. senator, visited when he could spare the time, often bringing pals like John Connally, who would one day be governor of Texas. Affable Congressman J.J. "Jake" Pickle dropped by sometimes. So did Ann Richards, a Travis County commissioner just starting her climb to the Governor's Mansion. Some of the most devoted attendees had nothing to do with politics, though, among them golfing legend Ben Crenshaw and University of Texas football coach Darrell Royal. After he moved to Austin, in 1972, Willie Nelson was welcomed into the fold. "[That was] before he was anybody," recalls Rudy's daughter Julie Cisneros Cantu with a laugh.

Somehow, the modest little Tex-Mex restaurant had become an Austin institution. Visiting celebrities were taken there—newspaper clippings and snapshots on the wall attest to visits by Kevin Costner and Lily Tomlin, as well as TV star Amanda Blake, who played Miss Kitty on *Gunsmoke*. Groups like the March of Dimes and the Oswaldo A. B. Cantu/Pan American Recreation Center knew they could count on Cisco's to host fundraisers. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, Rudy would let it be known that anybody who was alone was welcome to come have a free turkey dinner.

On a poker trip to Las Vegas in his late forties, he suffered the first of several heart attacks, and he died in 1995, at the age of 72. The funeral service "was standing room only," Cisneros Cantu remembers, with nary a dry eye in the house. But when the mourners filed past the casket, almost everyone broke into a smile. There was Rudy lying in repose with a cigar tucked securely in his suit pocket.

Ready-to-eat crispy beef tacos, pancakes, breakfast tacos, and an American Breakfast plate. Photograph by Travis Hallmark

The exterior of Cisco’s.Photograph by Travis Hallmark